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Shakespeare

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Two Poems · *John D. Robinson*

SHAKESPEARE

I am sitting here on a curb.
I'm not underneath a tree somewhere,
and I'm not in the middle of a pasture.
I am sitting on a curb
watching dirty wheels spin past me,
in front of me, just past my toes.
There is a man sitting beside me
counting out his money on the sidewalk.
He puts two one dollar bills
between us, close to his leg.
and separates his change —
three quarters, two dimes,
two nickels, and eight pennies —
with a nicotine-yellowed index finger.
Three dollars and thirteen cents.
He puts one dollar bill and the pennies
in the breast pocket of his worn suit coat,
underneath the corner of its five-inch lapel,
and stuffs the rest into his right pants pocket.

I am tired of this life.
I once heard a woman standing
in a checkout line say that
she was bored with life because
all the plots of all the soap operas
were becoming more and more alike.
I wanted to grab her shoulders,
spin her around and ask her
why the hell she thought she deserved
to be alive anyway. But now
I think I know how she felt.

I've been living here for six months,
too long. Every day I get up from bed,
go to the bathroom down the hall, take
a shower, and come out here. I sit here,
watching these people, and trying to write,
but it never works out. I usually end up
writing about little yellow flowers
or small puppies rolling around in the dirt.

One of those big UPS vans—I never can
tell if they are brown or green—
speeds by, fuming us with exhaust.
The man sitting beside me coughs twice,
then pulls out a half-smoked cigarette.
He turns toward me and says
“Got a match, Shakespeare?”
That's what they call me here,
but I don't know this one.
One of the other boys must have
told him that the skinny guy with
the notebook is an easy mark for lights.
I can imagine them all gathered
around a burning trash can,
bartering information about who
to ask for change and which alleys
are dry and where the cops hang out.
It makes me proud somehow
to know that I made it into
one of their sessions, to know that
one of them said “If you ever
need a match, just find Shakespeare.
He's a writer, you know.”

Jane Roberts says that we can
be born again as someone else.
She also says that a guy named Seth,

who lived a few thousand years ago,
speaks to her -- tells her the secrets
of life on the Earth-Plane.
She takes a tape recorder,
shuts herself in a completely dark room,
and goes into a psychic trance.
When she wakes up, she listens
to the tape she made and writes
down everything that Seth said.
She puts all of the things he said into books,
calls them Seth books, and sells them
to people who are bored with soap operas.
Sells them to people who want a better life someday.
Seth knows all about love,
and all about the mind and body
and how humans can make their lives better.
I wonder if Seth knows any
of the people living here with me.
I wonder if Seth says that they can
die and come back as someone else, too.

I'll tell you what. I'll go down
to the alley between the Channel Seven
building and the old Haverty's warehouse,
where all the boys sleep away the afternoon,
I'll get Willie, the young Hispanic
who got himself hit in the temple
with a billy club and never quite recovered.
I'll get Joseph, the drunk, the one who
gets all the sneers from the hair net
women on their way to the First Episcopal Church.
I'll get Ritchie and Randolph, the brothers,
who were married to the same woman
at different times in the sixties,
and spend most of their time arguing
about who made love to her the most.

I'll get Mozart, the one who is a little
bit off, the one who sings the solo
from "The Marriage of Figaro" every night at sunset.
I'll get old Ben, the one who was knifed
in the arm last fall for his bottle.
I'll get them all—they'll follow Shakespeare—
and we'll all be reincarnated as better people.
We'll drink brandy and smoke new
cigarettes and listen to Seth all day.

I give the man beside me a match.
He lights up his stub and offers me a puff.
He tells me that he might have enough
for a pint of wine later, if he
doesn't run into Bill. He owes
Bill two bucks for a sandwich.
He'd be happy to share it with me.
Anything for Shakespeare.